

PSYSOC 2013

## China as a “Civilization-State”: A Historical and Comparative Interpretation

Guang Xia

*School of Business, Macao Polytechnic Institute, P. O. Box 286, Macao SAR, China*

---

### Abstract

Thanks to the publication of Martin Jacques's *When China Rules the World*, the notion of China as a “civilization-state” has gained wide currency in China studies. This essay revisits his reading of Chinese civilization from a historical and comparative perspective. Historically, despite its exceptional longevity and continuity, Chinese civilization has gone through major changes, especially since China's entrance into the modern world. In fact, modern China, while consciously or unconsciously abolishing and retaining different aspects of its traditions, has embraced some basic components from Western modernity. Hence the transformation of China into a modern nation – first by Sun Yat-sen's ephemeral bourgeois revolution, and then by Mao Zedong's decisive socialist revolution. Contemporary China continues to be shaped by the interaction between the remaining fragments from Chinese traditions and global, mainly Western, forces. Comparatively, the Western dichotomy between tradition and modernity simply does not apply to China. In many ways China has been modern (by Western standard) since ancient times. For instance, a largely secular state, a meritocratic bureaucracy, a highly self-governed civil society, a written language accessible to both literati and laypeople, a stratification system based on achieved rather than ascribed status, a cohesive culture open to multiculturalism, the idea and practice of educational equality, etc., which are fundamental to the formation of Western modernity, have long existed in China. On the other hand, Chinese society, premodern or modern, distinguishes itself by its, among other things, Confucian values, family morality in particular. Indeed, even today, Confucian familism (in forms of paternalism, nepotism, groupism, personalism, communalism, authoritarianism, etc.) is crucial to the operation of China's power system, market economy, and everyday life. Therefore, as a function of its civilization, China is both similar to and dissimilar from the West. In defining China as a civilization-state or, more specifically, in identifying the role of Chinese civilization in contemporary China, we need to decipher Chinese civilization in both its continuity and discontinuity in Chinese history, and in both its similarities with and differences from its Western counterpart.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of PSYSOC 2013.

**Keywords:** secularism, rule by virtue, meritocracy, self-governance in civil society, cultural cohesiveness and inclusiveness, Chinese familism

---

### 1. Introduction

Corresponding author: Guang Xia  
E-mail: [guangxia@gmail.com](mailto:guangxia@gmail.com)

The rapid development of China in the post-Mao era makes China a thematic and recurrent topic around the world. Much attention is paid to, for obvious reasons, the role the Chinese state plays in the Chinese “miracle”. Unfortunately, the lack of understanding is as striking as ever. Outsiders, Westerners in particular, habitually tend to judge China in their own terms. Thus, when a Westerner thinks about the Chinese state, such concepts as “Oriental despotism” (for premodern China), “communism”, “totalitarianism” and “authoritarianism” (for modern and contemporary China) readily come to mind. If the Western imagination of the Chinese state continued to be confined by those Eurocentric, stereotypical, and ideologically charged concepts, Westerners would have little chance to know the real China, in history or at present. There is a growing consensus that China needs to be understood in its own terms, or in the context of Chinese civilization. A remarkable effort is made by Martin Jacques’s bestseller *When China Rules the World: the End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*. The title of the book is provocative enough. What really distinguishes it from many other China-related publications is its stress on the relevance of Chinese civilization. The book argues that the Chinese state is the embodiment and defender of Chinese civilization, and Chinese civilization is the secret of China’s recent resurrection. Jacques’s telling of the China story, however controversial, points to a plain but often ignored fact: China will remain mysterious if the role of Chinese civilization is left unsaid. In response to his reading of Chinese civilization or its contemporary manifestation, this essay attempts to interpret how Chinese civilization shapes the Chinese state from a historical and comparative perspective.

## 2. Chinese Civilization Defined by the Confucian Tradition

How Chinese civilization shapes the Chinese state has much to do with Confucianism, a defining factor of Chinese civilization. The Western term “Confucianism” may misleadingly suggest that the Confucian tradition began with Confucius. Confucius was certainly a key figure in the evolution of Confucianism, but he claimed himself to be “a believer in and lover of antiquity, a transmitter and not an innovator” (*Analects*: 7.1). Confucius lived in the late Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC). He once said that “The Zhou culture is founded on the two preceding dynasties. How splendidly rich is the Zhou culture! I follow the Zhou” (*Analects*: 3.14). The two preceding dynasties, the Xia and Shang Dynasty, started in 2070 BC! In other words, Chinese civilization had taken shape long before Confucius’s time. Interestingly, the Confucian nostalgia for the past has been part of the Confucian tradition per se. The Chinese word for Confucianism is *ru xue* (儒学), literally intellectuals’ teachings, which more accurately reflects the history and the nature of the Confucian tradition.

**The State in Relation to Religion:** All civilizations, with the peculiar exception of China, are religious – at least in premodern times. As the dominant social thought in premodern China, Confucianism is generally recognized as a this-worldly intellectual tradition, a tradition of humanism and rationalism. Of course, there were various religions, native and naturalized, in premodern China. What makes China unique is its lack of state religion (Xia, 2011). Regardless of the ruler’s private belief, no religion had or has ever been established as state religion. Therefore, different religions may, as they do, coexist in China, and people may choose to believe in any religion or no religion at all. If secularism means the separation of religion and state, and if secularism means the freedom of belief and unbelief, then Chinese civilization has been a secular civilization, and the Chinese state has been a secular state since ancient times. The lack of state religion in China excludes the possibility for the state to be legitimized by a divine transcendent being. In other words, the legitimacy of the state in premodern China had to be based on the human world – the ruler and/or the ruled. It should be noted that the Chinese idea of Heaven is not exactly the Chinese equivalent of the Christian God (or any god): in the Chinese context, what is transcendent is imminent or intrinsic to humanity. “Heaven” makes sense only in its unity with humanity, which is achieved not by or in Heaven, but in this world via human beings’ self-cultivation and self-perfection.

**Rule of Virtue vs. Rule of Law:** A legitimate ruler in China should be, at least in theory, a virtuous person. In Confucius’s words, “Let a ruler base his government upon virtuous principles, and he will be like the pole-star, which remains steadfast in its place, while all the host of stars turn towards it” (*Analects*, 2.1). The Confucian world would stand by Plato in the Plato/Aristotle debate with regard to what defines the best form of government. From a Confucian perspective, the rule of law is necessary, whereas the rule of virtue is preferable. The Chinese ideal of virtuous rulership is well conveyed in the popular legends of Yao and Shun, two sagely kings in the early stage of Chinese civilization. Yao and Shun are known both for their personal virtues and for their practice of *shanrang* (禅让). *Shanrang* is an abdication and succession system under which the current ruler would voluntarily relinquish the

throne in due time, and the new ruler was selected by the current one on the basis of the candidate's merits rather than blood. The authenticity of the legends is disputable, but the *shanrang* spirit has been repeatedly eulogized in Chinese history. With the emergence of the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BC), the *shanrang* system yielded to the throne inheritance system, which lasted until the end of imperial China (1911). However, even under the throne inheritance system, there were quite a few rulers who practiced *shanrang*. Moreover, in the Chinese dynastic cycle, a main reason for a ruler to be dethroned was his lack of virtue.

**Chinese Intellectualism and Meritocracy:** A virtuous ruler might not necessarily be a capable ruler, but the state as a bureaucratic system must, ideally, be competent. A basic feature of the Chinese state is its meritocracy. The *shanrang* system was officially dead since the Xia dynasty, but the *shanrang* spirit thrived in recruiting other government officials. As early as in the Zhou Dynasty, the principle of "selecting those of virtue and ability" gradually prevailed, and government officials were recruited mainly from those trained in schools and those with credible recommendations. Since the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), the first dynasty of imperial China, "selecting those of virtue and ability" became the guiding principle in recruiting all officials, with the lone exception of the throne. The installation of the civil service examination system in the Sui Dynasty (581-618) further standardized the process of recruiting officials. Under this system, anyone interested in working for the state would need to be well educated and be able to pass different levels of exams. Education was always important to the Chinese people, regardless of their family background. In Confucius's words, "In education there are no class distinctions" (*Analects*: 15.38). In the civil service examination system, Confucian intellectualism and the age-old meritocratic principle mingled, resulting in the distinctive Chinese literati-official tradition and making power institutionally inseparable from knowledge. In this tradition, educational equality led to political equality (in the sense that everyone would, through education, have equal opportunity to compete for government positions), and the examination system functioned to select most talented people to run the state.

**Self-Governance in Civil Society:** The nature of the state is partly defined by its relation to society. A basic feature of the state-society relation in premodern China is that its civil society was largely self-governed. Given the sheer geographic size of the Chinese empire and the then condition of communication/transportation, it was technically impossible for the government (central and local) to exert total or effective control over society. What, then, made the self-governance in Chinese society possible? The answer is: Confucian morality, particularly Confucian familism. In the Confucian world, familism was not simply about family values. The family was the centre and prototype of social relationships, and the whole society was conceived as an enlarged family. The values and norms that regulated family relationships (husband-wife, parents-children, and sibling relationships) also applied to other social relationships, and these values and norms were institutionalized at different levels. Therefore, in addition to the law of the state, there were rules for families, lineages, and clans, as well as regulations for local organizations or associations – all embodied the spirit of Confucian familism. As a result, normally civil society in premodern China was capable of self-governance, and there was not much need for state control. In Pye's words, "Chinese society had built-in powerful forces for self-regulation. The traditions of the family and clan and other associations and occupational groupings made government intervention to maintain routine order rare" (1994: 72). A popular Chinese saying, "the Heaven is high and the emperor is far away", well describes the self-governance of civil society in premodern China.

**A Unified Language and a Cohesive Culture:** The Chinese language and the Chinese culture played a vital role in the unification and continuation of the Chinese society as a country and the Chinese people as a nation. The Chinese language as a written language was unified across the newly established empire in the Qin Dynasty. Because of Confucian educational egalitarianism, the unified language was, in principle, accessible to all people. Therefore, the Chinese language functioned effectively to transmit the Chinese culture from intellectuals to laypeople, from one generation to another, and within the reach of the Chinese empire. Hence an "imagined community". On the other hand, the Chinese culture, with Confucianism at its core, was an open system inclusive or tolerant of cultural differences. In general, the Confucian tradition peacefully coexisted with Buddhism, Taoism, and other traditions (including ethnic cultures), resulting in Chinese multiculturalism. Despite or because of its openness, the Chinese culture was a powerfully cohesive factor in maintaining the collective identity of the Chinese people.

According to Jacques, modern China emerged in 221 BC, the beginning of imperial China. Indeed, the Western dichotomy of tradition and modernity does not apply to China. In many ways the Chinese state has been modern (by Western standard) since ancient times. In the West, secularization, educational equality, a rationalized or meritocratic bureaucracy, autonomous civil society, an open stratification system based on achieved, rather than ascribed, status, a unified language accessible to all social members, and multiculturalism had not appeared until

modern times. Unsurprisingly, some major Enlightenment thinkers (Voltaire, Francois Quesnay, Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Matthew Tindal, etc.), with their limited and indirect knowledge of the Confucian world, admired and praised the Chinese culture. In retrospect, it is no historical coincidence that the Enlightenment and the Confucian tradition should substantially converge in the Enlightenment Sinophilism. The Enlightenment Sinophilism faded away when the West, armed with its industrialized imperialist power, ascended to the dominant position over the rest of the world.

### **3. The Confucian World in Transition to Modernity**

Modernity as a whole was certainly a Western invention, and some of its core components, such as modern science and technology, industrialization, market economy, democratic politics, and the nation-state, originated in the West. Therefore, for a long time, modernization for the non-Western world has been identified by many, in both the West and the rest of the world, with Westernization. However, modernity and the West are not coterminous. Soon after the first encounters between the modern West and the Confucian world, it became clear that on one hand, there were no cultural obstacles for China and its East Asian neighbours (who were historically Sinicized) to learn from the West, and all East Asian countries were determined to modernize themselves; on the other hand, “wholesale Westernization”, as proposed by some radicals, was rejected by mainstream social thinking in East Asia, and all East Asian countries were selective about what to learn from the West. It turned out that Japan was the first country in the non-Western world to become modernized. Japan’s deliberate efforts to conserve its traditions (including those adopted from China) went unnoticed. The relevance of the Confucian tradition becomes obvious when the exception to the rule becomes the rule of “exceptions” in the Confucian world: Japan’s success has been extended to the Four Little Dragons since the 1960s and then to China in the past three decades. Hence, the emergence of East Asian modernity (Xia, 2005).

China’s progress to modernization is tortuous and prolonged. The dynastic empire was eventually terminated by the Bourgeois Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen and his Nationalist Party in 1911. Theoretically, Sun’s “Three People’s Principles” or, in Chinese, 三民主义 (Nationalism, Democracy, and the People’s Livelihood), really captured the spirit of the nation-state in the modern world, and his conception of nationalism was, under careful examination, largely based on his appreciative reflection of Chinese traditions. Unfortunately, the newly emerged Republic of China was soon in a series of international and civil wars. China had to wait until 1949, when Mao Zedong’s Communist Party came to power, to become a unified and independent country (as far as the Mainland is concerned). However, until Mao’s death in 1976, China was for the most part isolated from the developed world (except in the 1950s, when China and the Soviet Union were allies). Moreover, Mao adopted an almost nihilist attitude toward Chinese traditions. Indeed, if modernization was the mission of the nation-state, China would seem to have reached an impasse under Mao’s leadership. Nevertheless, Mao’s political legacy is not to be overlooked: China since 1949 has been a socialist country, and Marxism remains its official ideology. On the other hand, Mao was pragmatic rather than dogmatic. He never completely embraced the Soviet system, and he, near the end of his life, opened China’s door for Nixon’s historical visit.

In the post-Mao era, China has become both globalized and Sinicized: globalized, as a result of its economic reforms and open-door policy; and Sinicized, because of the conscious and unconscious reconstruction of its traditional culture. It is the interactions between global – still mainly Western – forces and the fragmented Chinese traditions that constitute the dynamism for the development of contemporary China. In their interactions, global forces become localized (hence “socialism with Chinese characteristics” or, for that matter, market economy with Chinese characteristics), and the fragments of the surviving Chinese traditions are constantly reconstructed in their coping with the progress of modernity. Apparently, some basic features of the Chinese state in premodern times, as summarized above, have been revived or reinvented. For instance, the ancient meritocratic principle of “selecting those of virtue and ability” has been reinstated when China resumed the National Higher Education Entrance Examination in 1977 and when it re-institutionalized the National Civil Service Examination in 1989. Obviously, the economic success and political legitimacy of the Chinese state can be largely attributed to its meritocracy. Moreover, Chinese leaders, inspired by the political wisdom of the Confucian world in premodern times, consistently and repeatedly stress the importance of the rule of virtue (together with the rule of law). In the economic sphere, in consequence of China’s market-oriented reforms, the self-governance in its civil society has been translated into enormous productive forces, as evident in the booming private enterprises. In addition, the social mentality in contemporary China is substantially depoliticized (in contrast with Mao’s China), leaving much

room for the revival of traditional morality. As a result, the influence of Confucian familism has become increasingly conspicuous and pervasive in Chinese society (in forms of paternalism, nepotism, groupism, personalism, communalism, authoritarianism, etc.). Furthermore, ideologically, with its glorious past, Chinese civilization can readily be a rich source for Chinese nationalism – a most recent example is the now popularized rhetoric of “Chinese dream”.

Given the nature of Chinese civilization, it is only a matter of time for China to join its East Asian neighbours in modernizing the traditionally Sinicized world. In its progress toward modernity, the relevance of China’s traditional culture has become increasingly visible. The Weberian “selective affinity” between Protestantism and the capitalist spirit also seems to exist between Confucianism and East Asian modernity. While Protestantism was, as observed by Weber, important only to the early development of modern capitalism, the Confucian tradition, however fragmented and reconstructed, remains vigorously alive in the Chinese/Sinicized world. Therefore, to demystify the Chinese “miracle” (or East Asian modernity in general), one needs to comprehend the role played by Chinese civilization in it.

#### 4. Conclusion

The globalization of modernity is a relentlessly sweeping process which testifies the validity and vitality of existing civilizations or cultures. In this process, many cultures, with all their past glory, have perished, while some others have more or less survived. For the bulk of modern times, the West has pioneered modernization and has dominated the rest of the world, resulting in Eurocentrism or Western-centrism. Some once-popular catchphrases, such as “white man’s burden”, “*mission civilisatrice*”, and, more recently, “the end of history”, well express Westerners’ sense of cultural superiority. History does repeat itself. In this post-colonial age, different models of modernity, with their cultural distinctiveness, seem to have been in the making, the shift of power from the West to the rest has been well under way, and the world has become increasingly multi-centred. Indeed, it is high time that we re-evaluated the relative values of different cultures in terms of how they relate to modernity. The formation of East Asian modernity, particularly the rise of China, tells a great deal about the relevance of Chinese traditions, Confucianism in particular, to modernity.

To appreciate China as a “civilization-state” or to identify the role of Chinese civilization in China’s resurrection is not to conceive Chinese civilization as a static and closed entity. In the context of modernity, or in the age of globalization, all existing civilizations or cultures can only sustain themselves by reinventing themselves, and they are in frequent interactions among themselves. Therefore, Chinese civilization, like any other civilizations, can only be properly understood in its historical transformations and in its relations with other civilizations. An ahistoric and ethnocentric approach to Chinese civilization (or any civilization for that matter) may make Samuel Huntington’s “civilizational clash” thesis a self-fulfilling prophecy.

#### References

- Confucius. (1979). *Analects*. Translated by D. C. Lau. Bungay, Suffolk: The Chaucer Press.
- Jacques, M. (2012). *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, revised/2nd edition. New York: Penguin.
- Pye, L. W. (1994). *China: An Introduction*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Xia, G. (2011). Confucianism in Relation to Religion: A Cross-Cultural Interpretation, *Journal of Macao Polytechnic Institute* (Macao), No. 1 (Series No. 5, 2011), 1-30.
- Xia, G. (2005). *East Asian Modernity vs. Western Modernity: From a Cultural Perspective* (in Chinese). Beijing: The SDJ Joint Publishing Company.